

OVERCOMING *Grandparenting* BARRIERS

How to Navigate Painful Problems with Grace
and Truth



LARRY FOWLER

DR. JOSH MULVIHILL, GEN. ED.



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2019 by Legacy Coalition

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

ISBN 978-0-7642-3132-2

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations identified NASB are from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org

Scripture quotations identified NLT are from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations identified KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Cover design by Dan Pitts

Author is represented by William Denzel.

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Series Preface 9

Introduction 11

1. Grandparenting Can Hurt! 15
2. Can't I Just Walk Away from the Pain? 27
3. But They Won't Let Me . . . 39
4. Lord, Where Is the Miracle? 51
5. The Influence Principle 69
6. The Grace Strategy 81
7. Give Me Some Practical Ideas! 93

Notes 103



SERIES PREFACE

GRANDPARENTING MATTERS is a series of short books that address common grandparenting problems with biblical solutions and practical ideas. I have the joy of talking with grandparents all over the country about their God-designed role in the lives of children and grandchildren. Regularly, questions arise about how to do what the Bible says in the midst of barriers, problems, and challenges.

Grandparenting is filled with many joys, but it can also be filled with unexpected pain and problems. Relational tensions, grandparenting restrictions, adult prodigals, grandparents as parents, divorce, long-distance relationships, and blended families all can cause the heart to ache. When brokenness touches our family, we naturally ask questions about how to navigate the challenges.

There are a growing number of resources for Christian grandparents that address the purpose of grandparenting, but few deal with the problem-solving side of family life. We created this series because problems are common, hope is needed, and God's Word provides guidance that can be applied to our unique situations. This series aims to simultaneously comfort and encourage, to equip and edify, as well as to point the way ahead. If you are discouraged or hurting, then I trust you will be blessed by this series.

If you are looking for biblical solutions and practical how-to's, you will find them in these pages.

We've titled the series GRANDPARENTING MATTERS because we believe the Bible teaches that the grandparent-grandchild relationship is important and worthy of our time and attention. Grandparents have a significant impact on the spiritual lives of grandchildren that is second only to parents. Our prayer is that the Gospel is proclaimed, God is honored, your family experiences healing and health, and your children and children's children know, love, and serve Jesus.

Larry Fowler has written a practical book that offers hope and help for the hurting grandparent. As you read this book, remember that hope is found in Christ alone and that help comes from the sufficient Word of God. True transformation is the work of God and is the result of the power of the Gospel. God calls us to be the aroma of Christ and agents of the Gospel to our family. Larry will help you do that in a way that embodies the grace and truth of the Gospel.

If the plain truth of the Gospel does not penetrate the heart, no amount of salesmanship or exemplary living will change the heart of a wayward person. God has given us prayer, told us to seek forgiveness, and called us to Christlike living so that the Gospel can restore and transform your family.

I'm delighted by the high caliber of authors in this series and the impact these books will have on families for their good and for the glory of God. It has been a tremendous privilege to be partners in God's grace with these fine authors. I trust you will be blessed by their godly wisdom, gain a renewed hope in God, experience joy in Christ despite trying circumstances, and be better equipped to be a disciple-making grandparent who passes on a heritage of faith to future generations.

Josh Mulvihill, PhD

Founding Member, the Legacy Coalition

Executive Director of Church and Family Ministry, Renewanation

Connect with me at GospelShapedFamily.com.

INTRODUCTION

Joy.

It's not often that grandparents spend their birthday in a maternity ward, but I did. In fact, I received the best birthday present I've ever been given there: my daughter Andrea gave birth to Tyler, my first grandchild, on the very day of my forty-third birthday. While I don't remember all the details, I do remember my cheeks aching that night from smiling all day long!

Micah, our last-born grandchild and now just two, comes charging through the front door when he visits, finds me, jumps into my arms, and gives me the biggest bear hug his little arms can produce.

From Tyler, our first, to Micah, our last, each grandchild fills our life with joy. I think when you look up "joy" in the dictionary, grandkids ought to be definition number one. Don't you agree? We've all chuckled at the well-worn line, "If I'd known grandkids were this much fun, I would have had them first." We laugh, of course, because it is true: Grandmas get the joy of the newborn without the journey of the pregnancy. Grandpas (usually) get to just report the smell without having to actually change the diaper. Yes, grandparenting usually means you get to enjoy the hugs without the hassles.

Besides bringing joy, the arrival of a grandchild can also bring new hope, even when the circumstances aren't ideal. In one family, new grandmother Teresa was hopeful that through the birth of her granddaughter (the result of a one-night fling), her daughter Megan would become more serious and settle down. In another family, John and Yvonne hoped that with the birth of their grandson, their son and daughter-in-law might take their marriage more seriously and repair the hurts. In still another, Vic prayed that his son would settle into his job and step up to his new responsibility as a father.

But sometimes in the months and years that follow the birth of a grandchild, that joy is crushed, and hope is dashed. When relationships crumble or harsh words leave deep wounds, joy gets pushed aside by anger, bitterness, and resentment. When adult children make bad decisions and bring consequences that affect the whole family, hope fades, and a resignation to a less-than-ideal reality sets in. Let's face it: Being a grandparent can bring the greatest joy life has to offer, but it can also be the conduit of deep pain.

Sometimes the grandparents cause the pain—too much control, too strong opinions, bitterness, bringing up past failures, pride . . . we can be guilty of any or all of those things.

The deeper the relationship, the greater the joy—or the pain—it can bring.

Sometimes the grandparents bear the pain, but the source of it is someone else in the family. A wrong decision by a wayward son can bring excruciating hurt. The divorce of an adult child, with all the accompanying messiness, usually has years of painful consequences. The relational pain and all that accompanies it—worry, bitterness, grief—can devastate. It can cause illness, depression, and thoughts of suicide. It can result in sleepless night after sleepless night. It can suck all the meaning and purpose out of the latter half of life.

I've learned that grandparents have different ways of dealing with their pain. Some grandparents cope by avoiding—walking

away from the relationships, away from the hurt. That can lessen the pain, but it also diminishes the possibility for recapturing the joy. Others try to fix it themselves and overreach, causing even more tensions, more hurt, and less chance for resolution. Still others exacerbate the situation by retaliating. Then there are those who respond with wisdom, patience, and love, and God uses them, even through their pain, to be a blessing to their family and a resolution to the situation.

Many, however, just don't know what to do. They've lost hope, feel helpless, and are completely out of ideas. They're stuck. They need hope renewed; they need a new strategy and a bunch of new ideas.

That is the intent of this book: to provide hope, strategies, and new ideas. Much of what you will read is based upon the conversations I've had with grandparents through my ministry as the leader of the Legacy Coalition. Other stories are based upon my own experiences—both successful and not—and those of my family and friends. I've changed many of the names and circumstances in order to protect the privacy of those who have shared with me. In some cases, I simply don't remember who I talked to (though I remember the story), and hence, I've created an illustration based on that conversation. However, every single story, whether actual or fictitious—or partly so—reflects a reality in the world of grandparenting. Many of the stories that have been related to me are heartbreaking, and I have felt so inadequate to give a wise answer and offer a helpful solution.

However, my main source of wisdom is the Bible. I'm a firm believer in the truth and the practicality of Scripture. My whole life is a testimony to that fact; I have never found the advice of God's Word to lead me astray, never found what is presented as truth to be found false. Therefore, my intent in writing this book is to connect you with the principles of Scripture, and by doing

***My intent in writing
this book is to
connect you with
the principles of
Scripture. Therein lies
the greatest hope!***

so, lead you to a new hope for the situation that is causing you so much pain.

This book will give you *hope*—no matter what your situation is. If you are one of those grandparents who feels hopeless, helpless, and out of ideas—no matter the cause—this book will lift your spirits and restore your resolve. But it will do more than that: As you read, you will also discover *help* in the form of new insights, new direction, and new strategies. Finally, you will find practical tools—*ideas*—that can revitalize your efforts to bring healing and restoration to your family.

Are you ready for a fruitful journey? *Read on.*

Grandparenting Can Hurt!

“Mom and Dad, can Andy and I come over and talk with you?”

Dennis and Audrey knew that such a request was unusual from their daughter Megan. After all, they saw her several times a week, and her three kids—their grandkids—as well. It could only mean something serious.

When Andy and Megan came over, they sent the kids into the family room to watch TV, and sat with Dennis and Audrey at the kitchen table.

“Mom, Dad . . .” Megan started. She paused and took a breath. “We have some big news—we’ve decided to move to Australia.”

The news took Audrey’s breath away. “Why?” was all she could blurt out. *Australia?* Why so far? Their family was so close, and she loved-loved-LOVED seeing her “three little Ds,” as she called them (the grandkids were two-year-old Dylan, four-year-old Dacey, and seven-year-old David). How often would she and Dennis see them now? Once a year? Once every five years?

Andy explained. “I’ve gotten a really good job offer there that would give me a good pay raise, and the cost of living is cheaper.”

Megan added, “I know this is a shock to you, Mom and Dad, but I’ve always lived here. I’d kind of like an adventure—to experience living somewhere else.” Dennis and Audrey couldn’t remember much of the rest of what was said—they were too numb from the news.

That conversation shook Dennis and Audrey’s world. They tried to make the most of every day before the move, seeing the grandkids as much as they could. Then the day of the move came and went, and the loneliness—the *quietness*—set in. Oh, how Audrey missed the hugs and the messes and even their little voices screaming. She could tell Dennis was affected too. He was quieter and seemed to have lost energy.

Christmas that year was the hardest. It was the first time in over thirty years that they celebrated alone—just the two of them. There had been little incentive to decorate; they even discussed not setting up the tree this year, but they decided to do it anyway. It was hard to put their hearts into it. When Christmas Day came, they connected by FaceTime with their “three little Ds,” but it was just so quiet, so *different*.

Dennis and Audrey’s church held a grandparenting seminar. They went—very reluctantly—because the topic of grandparenting, for them, had morphed from one of delight to one of pain. Their question was, “How can we possibly be an influence in our grandkids’ lives when they live so far away?”

Geographical distance is the most common barrier to impacting grandchildren spiritually.

They needed *hope* that they could still be involved with their grandkids. They needed *help* in strategizing. In addition, they needed *ideas* of what to do.

When our organization, the Legacy Coalition, talks about our vision to be intentional Christian grandparents, we are very aware that geographical distance is the most common barrier to impacting grandchildren spiritually—whether that distance is across the Pacific or just across the state.

Dealing with distance has been made much easier by the video capabilities of our smartphones and tablets, but we know those don't quite replace being with them physically. The dilemma of distance increases as grandchildren grow older: Connecting with young grandkids is much easier than staying connected with teenage or young adult grandkids.

Grandparenting from a distance is especially pervasive in Western culture. Our informal surveys in Legacy Coalition seminars and conferences show us that likely over half of American grandparents have at least one grandchild who lives "far away." If geographical distance from grandkids is an issue of yours, you will find some ideas to help bridge the gap in the following pages, but for a whole bookful, I recommend that you get *Long-Distance Grandparenting* by Wayne Rice, another resource in this GRANDPARENTING MATTERS series.

Geographical distance may be the most common obstacle to intentional grandparenting, but it is not the most agonizing. Relational distance is worse, and that is what we address next.

The agony of alienation

Caren and Tom used to take care of Brandon, the youngest of their four grandchildren, three times a week. Either their son David or their daughter-in-law Staci would drop him off early in the morning on their way to work. Caren would get him ready for school, take him there, and pick him up afterward. By that time, Tom would be home from work, and he loved helping Brandon with homework, playing a game together, or tossing a baseball back and forth.

"Tom, have you noticed a change in Staci?" Caren asked her husband one day. "She used to bring Brandon to the door, but I just realized it has been quite a while since she's done that. Lately she just parks in the street and lets him out. She hasn't actually come *in* our house in weeks."

They wondered if—*feared that*—something was wrong. When Tom asked their son, David just said, “Dad, stay out of it.” Tom hadn’t meant to pry, but David’s abrupt pushback left him more convinced that there was a problem. From that conversation forward, their relationship with David was strained as well.

Several days later, Caren got a text from Staci: “We’re not going to have you care for Brandon anymore—we’re going to put him in the daycare program at school.”

Caren was stunned. She didn’t text back right away because the whole gamut of emotions swept over her: anger, hurt, fear.

“Why? Haven’t we done a good job?” Caren finally texted back.

“We just want him to have the preschool experience,” Staci responded. Caren could tell it wasn’t the whole story, but she couldn’t get Staci to explain further. *Why would Staci do this?* she agonized. Was David in agreement? What had she and Tom done wrong? They *loved* Brandon and took great care of him.

That text from Staci was the first crack in the relationship between Brandon’s parents and grandparents. As time went by, Caren and Tom began to see signs that David and Staci’s marriage was in trouble, and they surmised that was the reason for Staci’s actions. Their fears were confirmed, and a year later Staci and David divorced. They shared custody of Brandon, but that meant Caren and Tom rarely got to see him. When Staci had him, she wouldn’t allow it. When David had him, he was afraid of upsetting Staci, so he would let them see Brandon only briefly.

Caren and Tom never fully learned what they did to upset Staci—if anything; communication with her was completely shut off. In fact, Caren said that was the hardest part—not understanding why they weren’t allowed to see the grandkids. They could only assume that the issues between Staci and David caused it, and that she took her anger out on them as well as on their son. They had given up trying to connect with her themselves and were praying that David would stand up to her and let them see their grandson. Any mention of the idea, however, only built a

taller barrier between them and David, and he would push them further away.

The pain was suffocating, especially to Caren. She told of seeing a Facebook post of the other grandma, Staci's mom, playing with Brandon. She said jealousy and hurt flooded over her, and the anger came back every time she remembered the post. She even took down the pictures of Brandon in their family room because she'd burst into tears nearly every time she looked at them.

Caren and Tom, because of their son's divorce, had been alienated from their grandson. They needed *hope in Christ*—they had lost it. They needed *help from Scripture* in discerning what to do next, and they needed a fresh batch of *ideas* for how to move forward.

Estrangement, or relational distance, takes a huge toll on grandparents. Many go through the grieving process of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, just as if there were a death. But since there *isn't* a death, that process often stagnates, and there is no resolution.

This is one of the greatest hurts of life. It is doubly difficult because not only is there a rift between a parent and their child (the grandparent and the parent), but the grandparent also loses one of the greatest joys of life—a relationship with a grandchild. That hurt can be compounded even more when there is spiritual separation as well.

The suffering of spiritual separation

I had just concluded my vision-casting presentation on the importance of grandparenting to a Sunday morning adult class, when a single grandmother stood up, and with a voice strong enough that most in the room could hear, she revealed her heartbreak:

“But what do I do? My son has said I can either see my granddaughter or I can talk to her about God, but I can never do both. He told me the minute I mention God, I will never be allowed to see my granddaughter again.”

I learned more of the story later. Gloria was a Christian, and from the beginning of their marriage, she and her husband, Glenn, had been careful to make church—and other spiritual practices—a priority. However, their son Brian began to reject his spiritual heritage in high school, though Gloria and Glenn did everything they could think of to encourage him back. They gave him books to read and urged him to go to Christian concerts and other events. They tried to talk with him, all to no avail. He continued to drift away through his college years.

Gloria said, “I can still hear his words the first time he told us he no longer believed in our God. That’s what he called Him—*our* God. And it wasn’t just that he didn’t believe; he told us he didn’t want to talk about it. So, since we didn’t know what else to do, we just kept quiet.”

When Brian married and then had a child, Gloria and Glenn did all they could to keep the relationship going. They never brought up spiritual things just so they could be with their adorable granddaughter. Then Glenn died in a car crash as a result of a drunken driver, and Brian took it hard. His atheist perspective turned to anger at the idea of God. When Gloria mentioned seeing Glenn again in heaven, he exploded—“If your God is real, why did He let that guy ever get behind the wheel?”

Gloria’s world crashed. Not only was she suffering from loneliness with the loss of her life mate, but Brian—who should have been a comfort or at a minimum, shared her grief—instead would lash out regularly at her faith. There was a constant, underlying tension when they were together, and Gloria feared it would greatly affect her granddaughter.

She wondered if she should just give up. She had lost hope that Brian would come back to God. She was terrified of the cultural influences that her granddaughter would face as she grew up without faith. She stopped talking about anything related to her own faith. And she feared she would see none of them in eternity.

Gloria’s story is not only real, it is *common*. Many Christian grandparents suffer silently because their adult children have rejected their faith. And like Caren and Tom, Gloria had lost hope. While there was still a relationship (though strained) with Brian, the spiritual gulf between them was a constant grief to her. She was clueless about what to do. Gloria represents another group of grandparents who need hope, help with a strategy, and some new ideas.



These three stories illustrate the three greatest hurts of grandparenting, and they are all summarized by the word *distance*. While geographical distance is difficult to overcome, relational distance is even more so. For the Christian grandparent, spiritual distance adds heartbreak on top of heartbreak.

Do you identify with one of these situations? Or maybe with two—are you both geographically and relationally distant from your grandkids? Or is your reality both a relational and spiritual chasm? I get it—your grief is understandable.

The pain is usually private

The adult class leader stood up and said something like, “We have a guest speaker this morning. Larry Fowler is going to share with us about grandparenting. But before he does, let’s cover the prayer requests we have on our list.” He tapped on his computer and the weekly prayer list appeared on the screen. To myself, I predicted what was going to appear, because I had seen it before. And when the prayer list went up, my expectation was fulfilled: There were about twenty-five prayer requests, and *every one of them was about a physical ailment*.

As I shared with the class and they responded, it became apparent that this group of grandparents was no different from others I had experienced: Many of them were experiencing the pain of

a broken relationship with an adult child. Others held the deep disappointment of an adult child who had walked away from their faith. Still others grieved when their son's or daughter's divorce cut off access to grandchildren. Few, however, were aware of how common those pains were.

As in this adult class, it is rare that we reveal the hurt we feel to others in a class setting or in some other public way. Sometimes it is because we are afraid that the request will get back to that son or daughter who is the cause of the pain. Or we are just embarrassed and afraid of what people might think. Christians of our generation have been pretty good at hiding hurt, pretending everything is all right. After all, haven't we been told again and again, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, that "good" parents don't have kids who abandon faith? Haven't we watched as parents whose kids turned out to be missionaries or pastors were honored and praised? Haven't we heard the sermons that underscore the ideal?

Or maybe it just hurts too much. Maybe we don't want to have to explain everything again. Maybe we are afraid of losing control of our emotions, so we don't share. We end up hiding the thing that hurts the most, and instead ask for prayer about things that are less emotional, less risky, and less revealing, like ailments. But keeping it private doesn't help; in fact, it lessens the possibility that we will receive support from our friends, or biblical ideas of what to do.

It is *real* pain

I've already written that I believe it is *one of the greatest* pains.

You've heard it said, "Mama is only as happy as her most unhappy child." We feel right along with our kids, and that doesn't change when they become adults. What *does* change is the ability to do something about it. When our adult children make wrong choices, we can't control them as we did when they were little, or

ground them like we did when they were teenagers. We try; we give them advice, but they don't listen—and usually it just drives a greater wedge between us.

Nearly every time I teach a seminar on grandparenting, some grandpa or grandma wants to talk during a break and share their personal heartbreak. Here are just a few examples of the kinds of hurts people confide:

***When our kids were young,
we held them in our arms.
That stopped as they grew older,
but we have never stopped
holding them in our hearts.***

Janice: “What do I do? My three kids who grew up in the church have all converted to Buddhism. They tell me to keep my Christianity to myself.”

Pete: “My wife died four years ago. I've remarried, but my son won't accept my new wife. Because he doesn't like her, he doesn't want her around his children. I've told him I wouldn't come by myself, so now he won't let me see the grandkids. How can I fix this?”

Hank: “My daughter cheated on her husband, which ended their marriage. She's now shackled up with the guy who she cheated with. The children, who live with their dad, are just devastated. He doesn't want any reminder of my daughter, so he doesn't let me around their children much. I let my daughter know how disappointed I was in what she did, and she cut off all communication. I've now lost my daughter and my grandkids. How do I restore my relationship with her without supporting her sinful behavior?”

Darcy: “My granddaughter just made club soccer and almost all the games are on Sundays. Her parents (my son and daughter-in-law) have just stopped going to church. Any time I bring it up, they snap at me and say, ‘Mom, she's gonna be fine without so much church.’ My granddaughter wants me to come see her play. What do I do?”

Marylou: “My grandkids are terrors. My daughter and son-in-law have completely different ideas of discipline than I do—and

theirs don't work. The kids just run wild all over the house, and their parents do nothing. I've tried to help them discipline better, but I've just made them angry with me. They get offended at any suggestions I try to make."

Patti: "Our son eloped with a Christian girl, and their marriage was rocky. A few years ago our daughter-in-law became an atheist activist. Their marriage ended but our son's faith has survived—he attends church regularly with the children. But he is reluctant to push the kids to go, knowing his ex might retaliate and start bringing the kids to the atheist conferences she attends. Our son has cautioned us to 'go easy' with teaching the kids the Bible—to not activate her revenge. We take his caution seriously, yet we wish to take advantage of the opportunity to influence while the grandkids live with us."

Each story is unique, but the reality is similar: deep pain for the grandparents, brokenness in relationships, anger and hurt in the adult children, and negative consequences for the grandchildren.

Why are you reading this book?

What is *your* pain? Why did you pick up this book? What is going on with your kids and grandkids, for which you hope to get some advice, some direction, and some solutions? Right now, before you read further, name it:

I want some hope for . . .

I need some help with . . .

I need some ideas about . . .

Hope. Help. Ideas. We all need them. My prayer has been that as you read this book, you will find some of each. Then as you read each page, keep that thing that is causing you pain front and center, and see how God might guide you in dealing with it.

Comfort from Scripture

- Do you feel like you are walking through the “valley of the shadow of death”? Read Psalm 23 again and allow it to speak to your pain.
- Remember that God may have a wonderful purpose for your pain and grief: “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Corinthians 7:10).
- Be assured—*God will give you strength to handle this*: “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Questions to ponder

1. When you became a grandparent, what were you hoping the experience would be like?
2. What was your experience with your own grandparents, and how did that impact your expectations for your role as a grandparent?
3. Which one (or more) of the “distances” is part of your experience now with your grandchildren? Geographical, relational, or spiritual?
4. Do you agree with the author that the pains of grandparenting are usually kept private, not usually revealed in church and social settings? Why or why not?
5. How do you react to the statement that the pains of grandparenting are some of the greatest pains of life?
6. What do you hope to get out of this book? Hope, help, or ideas?